DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 053 872 RE 003 739

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TITLE Using Good Literature to Teach Reading: Prostitution or Promise?
PUB DATE Apr 71
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the meeting of the International Reading Association, Atlantic City, N.J., Apr. 19-23, 1971

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Literature Appreciation, *Literature Guides, Literature Programs, *Reading Instruction, Reading Material Selection, Reading Programs, Reading Skills, *Study Guides

ABSTRACT

The use of good literature in teaching reading can mean the relegation of literature to the role of a vehicle for instruction rather than a process of encountering human experiences. Four principles underlying a quality literature instruction program help determine whether good literature is being used or abused: (1) wide exposure to many levels, qualities, and types of literature; (2) quality exposure as dictated by the curriculum, department, or teacher; (3) the opportunity for free pursuit of reading materials; and (4) the appropriate use of skills instruction. The fourth principle is crucial. The teaching of reading skills is merely a part of guiding students toward analysis and interpretation of literature. The teacher must examine literature for the literary content as well as for the reading processes involved. The teacher can then construct guides which will help the students experience the literature in an appropriate intellectual-emotional manner. Reading skills instruction must stem from content objectives and be incorporated in a broad program of literature instruction. Sample written guides for "Fire and Ice" by Robert Frost and references are included. (AL)

ED053872

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RE003 739

USING GOOD LITERATURE TO TEACH READING: PROSTITUTION OR PROMISE?

In spite of the possibility of gaining attention through appeals to prurient interest, the question posed here is a serious one which continues to provoke controversy in the English education community. Literature here refers to fiction, as represented by the various genre. The word "using" -the heart of the problem- in this sense denotes a subjugation of literature to the teaching of reading skills, so that literary form and art become vehicles for instruction, rather than ends in themselves. As part of the process of answering the question here posed, it will be necessary to point out four principles which are essential to any quality literature program. The fourth

principle will be elaborated in some depth and will lead to the resolution of the question, i.e., Prostitution or Promise?

The four principles necessary for quality literature programs are (1) wide exposure, (2) quality exposure, (3) free pursuit, and (4) appropriate skills instruction. They are here listed in descending order of importance. Let us explain each briefly. The principle of wide exposure is neither new nor revolutionary. It has been proposed (in some degree) by many commentators, most recently and effectively by Fader and McNeil in their Hooked on Books. Wide exposure means simply saturating the school environment with all manner of literature, attractively displayed on drug store racks, tables, bulletin boards, or bookcases, all readily available to the kids. The works of Sam Walter Foss, Edgar Guest, Langston Hughes, and Shakespeare are all fair game- the trash and the trivial, the trite and the trifling, the sophisticated and the select, the comics and the classics. And the students themselves should be encouraged to contribute to the classroom collections. The basic assumption here is that reading children with poor literary taste are infinitely to be desired over tasteful nonreaders of literature. As submitted by G. Robert Carlsen in Books and the Teenage Reader, a youngster has several levels to grow through before achieving the degree of taste exhibited by sophisticated readers of literature. Higher levels are not reached by denying satiation at lower levels. Let the good stuff take its chances with the trash. The classroom must abound with literature of all forms and all qualities.

The second principle, quality exposure, is a subtle and non-coersive means of improving taste while maintaining interest. It rec-

ognizes the power of modeling behavior and the futility of censorship. Of course, "quality" involves arbitrary choices. It may be defined as the school district's curriculum syllabus or the department chairman's conviction. In some cases, it may even be determined by individual teachers. I am reminded of the English professor who confronted his class one morning with a new and exciting experience. He wanted their opinions. The experience? "Walk with light." The class was suitably impressed. After a reverent moment, he intoned again, "Walk with light. Isn't that sheer poetry?" The class was sure it was. Someone wanted to know the source. "I suppose it's anonymous," the professor replied, "it's on a sign at the corner of Main and Third streets." The point is simply that quality exposure will depend on who determines the curriculum.

Quality exposure is most obviously represented by those works of literature we choose to teach. But there are other ways to emphasize works we think are worthy: A great deal of quality literature is available on film, on tape, on LP records, over radio, and on television. Why does the story hour end at grade 3 or grade 6? My own experience confirms that students enjoy being read to at least through the tenth grade. Selections can be tape recorded by students, by the teacher, or by an outside person such as local radio or TV personalities. My wife used to tape-record stories and poems for my junior high school students. She enjoyed it; they enjoyed it. And don't forget live reader's theater, starring your students! A major point here is that quality exposure is not accomplished by heavy-handed fiat. And it can be accomplished in dozens of ways short of direct instruction.

The third principle is one of free pursuit. Lyman Hunt (1967) at the University of Vermont has suggested USSR--uninterrupted sustained silent reading. Some research (Oliver, 1970) has suggested that classes which engage in USSR as recommended increase their literary taste and improve their reading skills simultaneously. USSR is characterized in part by (1) a significant portion of classroom time set aside for silent reading, (2) total self selection by the student with regard to the materials he chooses to read, (3) no interruptions, and (4) the requirement that both teacher and students read. There are no exceptions to this last guideline. The teacher, in short, serves as a model as well as a fellow explorer of literature. The English classroom during USSR may be the only serene portion of the lives of many of today's students (and of today's teachers as well).

Finally, principle number four involves appropriate skills instruction. A recent dissertation by Sanders (1970) has suggested that important and transferable reading skills for teaching literature are best taught through an analysis of that literature for literary content as well as reading process. The key to such constructive instruction is simply this: the teacher must determine what human experiences he derives from the literature and guide students to a confrontation with those experiences. This involves an analysis of each work of literature to be taught. The content analysis is accomplished by writing down his own concept, i.e., interpretation, together with a list of all vocabulary essential to confronting or experiencing that interpretation. Once this has been done, only a modicum of training and knowledge are necessary for the

process analysis, which is accomplished by tracing his <u>own</u> interpretation back to identify which words, facts, symbols, or inferences were necessary to the end product. At this point, oral or written guides can be devised to help the students simulate the process engaged in by the teacher. One example: Robert Frost's "Fire and Ice" has been selected for instruction in 9th grade. Based on his content analysis, the teacher decides that one idea too interesting to overlook is the symbolic use of fire and ice as destructive extremes. This decision leads him to retrace the steps involved in his own reading. This process analysis leads him from a conclusive statement back through the necessary identification of the symbolic referents and back still further to the literal meanings of fire, ice, and the poet's speculation. Self-analysis of the "reading" process which he has just experienced allows the teacher to construct guides which simulate the steps along this intellectual-emotional path. (See Appendix A.) At no time does the teacher talk <u>about</u> symbolism, talk <u>about</u> how to read a poem, talk <u>about</u> the reading skills necessary for literature. The skills instruction is part and parcel of the necessary guidance through the literary experience.

Now we must answer our question: Is it prostitution to use good literature to teach reading? We have answered it already, by implication. Let us be explicit. If the literature is subjugated to the teaching of reading skills then that literature <u>is</u> in fact being prostituted. If we leaf through a short story to find paragraphs which lend themselves to main idea practice, the literature is being prostituted. If we use a short story for some skills lessons this week to

prepare for a short story unit next week, the literature is being prostituted. On the other hand, if the skills instruction stems directly from the content objectives and is achieved as part of the process of encountering the human experiences in lite_ature, then this use of good literature to teach reading is not only promising but essential. This kind of reading instruction cannot be distinguished from quality literature instruction.

APPENDIX A

FIRE AND ICE

by Robert Frost

Literal Level

DIRECTIONS: After reading the poem, select the best literal summary from the following. Check your choice.

____ 1. The author suggests that while death by fire or freezing are equally unpleasant, he would prefer fire.

____ 2. The author has experienced unrequited love so often that he wished to die.

____ 3. The author speculates on the relative merits of world destruction by fire and by ice.

____ 4. The author states that if he had to die twice, either fire or ice would do the job.

FIRE AND ICE

by Robert Frost

Interpretation

DIRECTIONS: Symbolism is usually employed by an author when he wishes to state an abstraction in concrete terms. Below are several terms which "fire" and/or "ice" might symbolize in this poem. If a term is symbolized by "fire", write "F" in the blank before it. If a term is symbolized by "ice", write "I" in the blank. You may use as many or as few of the terms as you wish; however, you must be able to justify your choices.

____ humanitarianism

____ nuclear explosion

____ fire

____ destruction

____ hate

____ sexual desire

____ violence

____ ice

____ (other) _____

_____ speed

_____ bias

_____ isolation

_____ love

_____ death

_____ prejudice

_____ non-communication

_____ extremism

FIRE AND ICE

by Robert Frost

Interpretation of Total Work

DIRECTIONS: Select the statement below which best expresses the total meaning of the poem. If you wish, you may select more than one statement. You must be able to justify your choices.

_____ 1. Extremes are dangerous.

_____ 2. Hate and love are equally effective at destroying.

_____ 3. Nuclear holocaust will end the world before another Ice Age.

_____ 4. Unreasoning violence stands the best chance of destroying or incapacitating mankind.

_____ 5. You only live once.

_____ 6. The spirit of man is deadened by isolation.

_____ 7. Refusal to obey the Ten Commandments will mean the end of the world.

_____ 8. (Other) _____

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